

\nc\ideology

28 October 1988

Notes on the nature and content of ideology; and on "just cause" for organized violence (both as stimulated by Noam Chomsky)

On the Nature of Ideology

Basically allied to the analysis of ideology is the concept of homeostasis: as a dynamic system aiming/serving to preserve/maintain structure and/or process.

Part of what helps/works to preserve, and part of what is preserved, is consciousness and communication.

Consciousness includes: perception and memory--conscious and " u n c o n s c i o u s " - - a w a r e n e s s , a t t e n t i o n , conceptualization...expectations, beliefs...

Another such part--both preserving and preserved--is values, goals, ideals, preferences, desires, purposes...

In Papers on the War--specifically, in the Quagmire Myth and the Stalemate Machine--I exposed a homeostatic system involving (linking/coupling/wiring together) both the US/GVN and the DRV/VC that worked to preserve an escalating, stalemated war.

The "myth" was not the existence of a quagmire, a bloody mess hard to back out from or to escape, drawing everyone in further and deeper...but the supposition that the entry into this bloody bog had been wholly unconscious, deluded, inadvertent, unwarned and unforeseen....

In contrast to this myth, the reality that needed to be explained--that our own ideology did not permit us to foresee, believe, understand easily--was that our leaders (and perhaps the DRV as well?!--a possibility that remains to be investigated, and which Kolko does not address) had entered this interactive process in the face of precise, authoritative and correct warnings--which they denied and concealed at the time and long after, along with the reality of what they were doing, planning, threatening and expecting--of its nature, danger, murderousness and social costs, lack of promise, and long-term irrevocability.

(PoW, 41): "The stalemated killing 'machine', so far as there is one, is made of men and women, of human habits and relationships that they have made or maintained, and that can be unmade by them."

I.e., "in Dwight Macdonald's phrase"--as I supposed in 1972, not knowing, at 41, with a Ph.D. in Economics from Harvard, that he was quoting Marx (by the same token, this reveals accurately the nature of my introduction to radicalism, or "going to the roots"--"the root is man." Again, I was probably not alert in 1972 to the

gender-reference in this supposedly generic reference: or to its accuracy, referring to "the root of the trouble, of evil" both in Marx's time and our own. (Though the role of women in this homeostatic system is under-analyzed).

The same is true for other homeostatic social systems: of privilege, hierarchy, domination, prejudice, denial, oppression, exploitation, violence...

However: in each of these cases, the pattern of "unfairness, injustice, 'inhumanity' (!) was not created by a single generation of humans (i.e., primarily, men) and is probably not susceptible of being wholly unmade or transformed, radically modified, by a single generation.

Moreover, although the pattern may have been largely created by a single gender--men--it can probably not be radically transformed by a single gender: least of all, by the efforts alone of the same male gender that not only created it but continues to manage, dominate and exploit it. But to repeat, if the pattern is to be changed, it will probably not be by women alone.

With new technology of communication, changes of awareness are now possible with amazing, unprecedented speed, well within one generation. But each of these patterns is a homeostatic system, in which system-preserving processes are redundant, reinforcing, mutually reconstructive: and very largely "unconscious," "protected" from deliberate efforts at change by unawareness, denial...

Thus change, whether deliberate or not, in one process, or aspect of awareness, is not easily preserved, nor transmitted in a change-producing manner to other aspects of the system; nor will such broader responsive and adaptational changes reliably, or often, be of the nature desired, or in any way desirable.

Thus the problematic, even highly questionable, nature of the notion of "revolution" --though Bryan Willson was expressing its attraction for him last week--already by the '30's, still more by the '80's.

The Content of Ideology

Ideology determines, among other things, what cannot, without great difficulty (and perhaps "luck," "grace", effort or gift of imagination or memory, special experience, "infection" or "subversion," a special transmission--in the Zen phrase!--from outside the system) be perceived, understood, come into awareness.

By the same token: what is denied, obscured, kept unconscious, systematically misunderstood or misperceived, subject to systematic or recurrent "error."

(This is among the preoccupations of Marx, and Freud: two non-believing Jews of 19th Century central Europe. And of me: a non-believer of Jewish parents converted, like Marx's, to Christianity).

(Note the dynamic notion of "Error" in Christian Science: a counterpart to the Christian notion of Evil. "Maya" as a dynamic, energetic entity or force. In both CS and Buddhism the corresponding questions, "Why Error?" and "Why Maya?" are paradoxical and essentially unanswerable.)

This includes: the disadvantages, limitations, injustices, dangers of one's own social system; the realistic advantages or potentialities of existing alternatives or rival systems.

Also, the vulnerabilities, the levers or triggers to change or instability of one's own system.

To the end, or effect, of concealing all these aspects of one's own social system or its rivals--whatever might de-legitimise or destabilize one's own system--the ideological system conceals or prevents awareness of many of the major aspects, characteristics, dynamic functions of the respective social systems, even considered from a non-evaluative, "objective, realistic" perspective.

It is made difficult or socially dangerous simply to understand one's own social system--in a reliably predictive, "purely scientific" sense--lest someone come across, communicate, act upon an understanding of it that would motivate and facilitate changing it.

Very simply: In our society, it is difficult (and risky) to perceive, understand and express, the disadvantages, dangers, limitations, injustices--and in general, the actual characteristics and workings--of capitalism.

Similarly, within "socialist" society.

And since each society is "compelled" to misperceive and misunderstand itself and the other, its "rival"/"adversary"/alternative, neither (i.e., most individuals within each) is able adequately or realistically to comprehend their interaction, with each other and with their environments.

Likewise, within our own system, we are prevented from perceiving realistically or comprehending the actual nature and workings of:

- Democracy
- Male domination (sexism)
- Racism
- Class structure, class domination
- Male violence
- Child abuse
- Extreme deprivation (poverty, hunger, ignorance, preventable illness, physical abuse (as of children, prisoners, women, blacks by police), homelessness...)
- Environmental destruction, exploitation, "abuse", pollution.
- Imperialism
- Militarism
- The interactions of all these with each other, and with capitalism

These injustices or "vices" are generally protected by obscurity, active and motivated mechanisms of denial, concealment and incomprehension. But a number of them also work upon their social environment and their own participants in a way that is self-reinforcing, forming "vicious cycles" and "addictions" that amount to social traps, peculiarly hard to escape once restraining influences are weakened enough to allow these tendencies to take strong hold. Thus: material greed; male violence and domination; militarism; racism; national chauvinism, distrust and contempt for foreigners; contempt and disregard for the relatively weak...

All of these have been encouraged during the Reagan years, which have seen the deliberate weakening of restraining and compassionate habits, attitudes, laws, institutions. It may be very difficult to put these "genies" back in their bottles...(as it was for the Democrats to restrain the genie of anti-Communism, once hst invoked it in 1947-48, even when it turned on them).

On Just Cause for Violence

What does Noam Chomsky consider Just Cause for organized violence?

Presumably (since he is not an absolute pacifist, though an extreme skeptic and "narrow constructionist" on just cause for violence):

--Repelling, resisting or expelling a foreign invader.

--Revolution against an abusive, oppressive, intolerably exploitative regime or ruling class (where non-violent means of liberation are clearly ineffective or unavailable).

Harder questions arise--and Chomsky is clearly extremely skeptical, but perhaps not totally dismissive--over various forms of aid by "others/ outsiders" to such putatively just violent efforts.

But in mainstream US ideology, aid at least in the forms of diplomacy, propaganda, perhaps sanctuary, financial and material support (perhaps including, as in Afghanistan, highly advanced technology--Stingers, communications, satellite photography) are all legitimate, if not obligatory.

NC might well accept the above in many cases--though not in its common covert--thus, anti-democratic and putatively illegal--guise. But he would generally balk at what mainstream ideology has further come to accept in the Cold War era: "advisors," combat units, air support, bombing.

In particular, if these latter forms of direct involvement are ever to be considered, he would presumably emphasize the necessity for evidence or strong reason to believe in consent by the great majority not only of our own citizens but by the people we are purportedly "aiding."

Moreover, this consent must be presumed to be contingent--e.g., upon the means used, and actual effects and prospects of effectiveness--and susceptible of being withdrawn, on the basis of actual experience. If withdrawn, the violent "aid" ceases to be legitimate or tolerable, and must cease.

But I am not aware that NC has addressed some other common cases of revolt or "revolution/liberation", including:

--Secession/separatism, from a larger political entity.

This can be undertaken for a variety of motives--which will generally be described as "self-determination," and "liberation"--

and which may also have an arguably "nationalistic" basis--which can often be recognized (by others) as reactionary, obscurantist, repressive, oppressive, expansionist...

--Thus, the desires of American colonists to escape the restraining influence of the British parliament in the interest of exterminating and expelling Indians and taking their land.

--Or, the determination of Afghan "nationalists/anti-Communists" to keep their women subordinate and illiterate.

--In general, the interests of colonial settlers to oppress and exploit "natives," often beyond the limits approved by metropolitan sponsors.

--Tribal, or religious "fundamentalist" instincts for separatism or change: sometimes accompanied by a desire to reinstitute quasi-slavery, extreme punishments, extreme sexism.

--The desire to preserve for a regional group, or its elite, the advantages of local resources, institutions or geographic features, without sharing these with a broader community: without "subsidizing, being taxed or exploited" for the benefit of others.

--See the motives toward secession of the South in the Civil War. (See also, skeptically and critically, the motives of the North in opposing secession).

Where the motive is to repress or dominate certain segments of the local population, the "self" that is being "determined"/asserted is ambiguous, problematic: as is the legitimacy of the violent effort, and of aid or encouragement to it.

Moreover, as such bases of revolt are seen as problematic, in terms of legitimacy, so the possibility emerges of legitimate ("just") counter-revolution, counter-secession, violent efforts to preserve or extend integration (which will be described as, arguably, imperialist) or an existing social order or structure.

Of course, in mainstream US ideology, such efforts--which are the core of American foreign policy with respect to the "Free World"--are not "possibly" or "arguably" legitimate but unquestionably so, though rarely described or understood in these terms. What is raised here is whether Chomsky would ever, and under what circumstances, accept these as legitimate; or, various forms of aid to these.